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## SEX EDUCATION: THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH<sup>\*</sup>

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SARAH J. McNARY  
State Normal School, Trenton, N.J.

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What teacher has not seen the purest gold of literature tarnished by a simper, a sly nudge, an odious leer, going the rounds of the class at the merest mention of love or marriage? Who, at least in the early stages of her teaching, has not deliberately evaded scenes or passages, however beautiful in themselves, that might excite such reactions? Is either omission or an obvious shifting of emphasis the best method of dealing with this particular situation? Either procedure, it is evident, ignores the claim of the subject taught. But in these days, it may be answered, we are trying to teach, not subjects, but human beings. There lies the point at issue: Are we meeting human needs by a policy of silence? What is our opportunity?

No one else can so definitely shape the ideals that affect right living as the teacher of literature. That is a truism, perhaps. Yet it is well to ask ourselves occasionally whether we are still seeing our subject whole; for not otherwise can literature, for all our labor, do for our pupils what it does for those who read it from choice, not from compulsion. It broadens their world by carrying them, by the exercise of imagination, into new scenes and new relations; it opens their eyes to the meaning of life as they share it or behold it; and it prepares them for experiences that are to come. The teacher who keeps in mind these basic functions of poem and story will not become lost in a maze of distracting detail, which too often drives high-school pupils to seek in flashing magazine or hundred-thousand thriller the emotional adventure denied them by slow-going or obtuse classroom methods; nor will she evade or obscure a vital issue of life when it confronts her in the

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novel or the play that she is teaching. She will even make deliberate selection in accordance with the deepest needs of her classes—needs that they express, if at all, in a manner she deploras.

For this phase of her work the personality and attitude of the teacher are of the utmost importance. Sentimentality, over-emotionalism, is as disastrous as the purely scientific method would be. Poise and sanity are as essential as reverence for the idea presented and sympathy for the inexperience that makes crude response or none, and as the delicacy of perception that perceives when the young learner's best expression is conveyed without words.

Most students quickly become aware of a teacher's attitude without formal statement. The smirking consciousness that giggles at the word "love" will become clear-eyed calm under wise leadership. Sometimes a brief talk is necessary to help to readjust a distorted point of view—a talk ostensibly directed, it may be, toward quite another objective—the distinction, for instance, between life-situations about which we may legitimately joke and those which should be kept as sacred as religion. Here as always in the work of the teacher of English the emphasis should be upon the example to be commended. A comparison may be made of a series of cartoons upon the mere foibles of family life, like Mr. Briggs's series, "The Handy Man about the House," and "It Happens in the Best Regulated Families." Or the occasion of the talk may be a direct violation of the standards that are observed by all right-minded people—silly teasing, or the arousing of undue self-consciousness when boys and girls engage in what should be matter-of-fact enterprises of school business or of social life. In my own work, which is with girls just out of high school, I find that they at once become deeply serious when they are talked to about the cruelty of jesting at anyone who may be entering upon a really significant experience, and about the pity of arousing a foolishly distorted sense in connection with what should seem a matter of course. An appeal to protect their companions, and especially those younger than themselves, from this kind of hurt never fails to win an earnest response. Thereafter the love situations encountered in literature are met without a trace of silliness.

That such passages ought to occur occasionally in the literature we give to high-school students I think needs no arguing. If we leave some of our young people to form their ideals of love and marriage on the ways of speech that prevail among their immediate acquaintance, or on the novels that circulate among them, we shall be risking much. We shall be risking the vulgarity of soul and expression which, beginning in curiosity, passes into greed for crude sensation, and then becomes the "bluntness of body and mind," the callousness, the deadness of heart, so vividly described by Ruskin.

The order in which the various phases of the ideal should be presented is debatable. My own arrangement is theoretical; wider experience than mine may reverse the sequence I suggest. The problem of distribution has also to be met. Whether we should concentrate our attention to the social ideal in the last year or years of the high school, or distribute it throughout the course, I am not yet prepared to decide.

At whatever point we may choose to begin, this should, I believe, be the initial idea: the relations of the established home, with chief emphasis at first upon the idea of parenthood, its responsibilities, its sacrifices, and its satisfactions, especially as these are concerned with young children. We use so many poems about babyhood in the elementary school that we are prone to omit them altogether in the high school, where many of them may be really needed more—the most exquisite of the cradle songs, for instance. Swinburne's child poems have not yet been included in primary-grade literature. We might use some of them for this part of our high-school material. The songs in Tennyson's *Princess* are especially good, expressing, as they do, the intermediary, uniting, and forward-looking significance of the child in its relation to the parents. Very late in the course, and then only in more intimate moments, with a selected group of girls whose mood has been delicately attuned, there may come such a poem as Irene Rutherford McLeod's "Unborn," breathing an expectancy of motherhood that is scarcely less virginal than maternal, for it is womanhood itself brooding over the ultimate secret of its own nature:

Little body I would hold,  
Little feet my hands enfold,  
Little head my tears have blessed,  
Little mouth that seeks my breast,  
Little shining soul that cries  
From the worship of his eyes,  
I must wait that I may be  
Great enough to mother thee.

With the same care in choosing the occasion, to the boys should be given Miss McLeod's profoundly moving "Mother to Son."

It is less easy to find literary material that specifically impresses the idea of fatherhood. It is especially desirable that we should have a good presentment of the companion-father. That there is a deep-lying need for this kind of matter is evident from the testimony of a social worker of wide experience, who has found that the arousing of a desire for normal fatherhood is the strongest appeal that can be made to boys for the end of clean living. Without this desire, he says, direct teaching of scientific facts is far less effective than its advocates have expected. The best example that we have is the picture of spiritual fatherhood in *Silas Marner*. It may be companioned for girls, at any rate for outside reading, by Mrs. Deland's short story, "The Child's Mother."

The ideals of married life should grow into increasing clearness with the high-school course—the ideals of comradeship, of sacrifice, of service, of fulfilment. In the present list of high-school classics there is more than a little for this part of our work. The home fires of *Odysseus* and *Penelope* shine clearly through the centuries. The contrasting household of *Agamemnon* and the false *Clytemnestra*, with the generation's doom that its crimes entailed, is flashed out again and again by *Homer* to set forth the ideal home more sharply by its contrast. His method may be ours as occasion offers. Now *Browning* pinnacles home-worth and husband-lover in *Herve Riel*; now *Arnold* hints delicately of the tragedy that may grow out of an inevitable difference in nature, in "The Forsaken Merman." For our brief, trenchant comment, our thought-arousing question on the influence of married companionship upon all-determining action, we may find situations

in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in *Macbeth*, in *Malory*, and in *King Lear*. Such lyrics as "John Anderson, My Jo, John," and "There's nae luck about the house when my gudeman's awa," speak, or rather sing, for themselves.

It is not a very long list that I have assembled. The Greek home remains the most impressive for our purpose. Such is the inveterate passion for romance in our literature that we close the tale when the search for a mate, through shining or through devious and cloudy ways, is somehow ended. I wish we had for high-school uses a picture of the outreaching home that those make whose spirits are finely tuned to fine issues, a home like the one in Dorothy Canfield's *The Bent Twig*. With this purpose to the fore, a generous addition should be made to the list of novels for outside reading. To the reports on these books may be added a few words from the teacher, calling attention to the beauty of the home-life element and bringing into prominence its spiritual basis.

The obverse situation may for the most part be left to point its own moral. Strain, unhappiness, disaster in marriage from whatever cause, require little reinforcing exposition. The best example for classroom purposes is Tennyson's treatment of the King Arthur story in *The Idylls of the King*, which shows how the sin of Guinevere not only destroyed her own happiness, but broke down the whole social order which her husband had instituted.

The last and most delicate phase of the subject to be presented is that of premarital love. At an early stage the class should be led to question what beauty really is, or at least to discriminate between empty prettiness and beauty that reveals character. An extended study of pictures would be most helpful in developing this idea. Millet's statement that he could show the essential beauty of womanhood by the way a mother looks at her child might open a new conception of far-reaching import. The best literary presentation of the higher beauty set over against the lower is Sill's comparison of the Venus of Medici and the Aphrodite of Milo. That poem is not too subtle for a Senior class if it be given at the right moment. There must, of course, be pictures or reproductions of the statues to accompany it.

Young love in all its beauty, whether joyously fulfilled or tragically frustrated, appears in the literature on the college entrance list: *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Elaine*, and *Lorna Doone* come at once to mind. In "The Princess" the situation, for all its fantastic accompaniments, is analyzed with practical wisdom that may well be stored in the minds of our young folk. The sacrifice that the deepest love may be called upon to make may be pondered in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Henry Esmond*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. The sinister aspect of the subject may be glimpsed in *Ivanhoe*, where it is set off by the purity of the high-hearted Rebecca; it may be envisaged in the *Vicar of Wakefield*, and sufficiently apprehended in Milton's *Comus*. As the best antidote to any possible sentimentalism, I should by all means include Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

Direct exposition of the spiritual nature of love may be found in Emerson's essay on "Friendship." Ideals of the character of woman may be noted as they appear in Ruskin, in Lanier, and in Browning. Some of Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" should be given when the time is ripe for their exquisiteness. Wordsworth's "She Was a Phantom of Delight" should be memorized voluntarily. Can we match it by a superlative analysis of a man's character in the home relation, done with lyric emotion?

For supplementary reading one has a host of choices: A. S. Hardy's *Passe Rose*, F. F. Moore's *The Jessamy Bride*, and Lane's *Nancy Stair* among these. The theater can do us good service, but her zeal must be often tempered by our discretion.

On most of the topics I have mentioned little direct response from the pupils should be expected. There should be none at all in writing, except, perhaps, on those that touch the life of home. To fill the minds of boys and girls with definite desires for whatsoever things are pure, lovely, and of good report, to direct their purpose to meet nobly the great experiences of life—this is our aim. Not to overdo in our pursuit of it is as important as not to evade it. To steer a middle course we need all the wisdom that life has stored up for us. Most of all we need reverent and farseeing common sense.